


Where have all the cyberfeminists gone? Part 2

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In a prequel to this post I have briefly introduced the history of the cyberfeminist movement and some developments leading to the status quo. Here, I would like to think about its legacy and potential contemporary relevance.

In the introduction to Cyberfeminism 2.0, Gajjala and Ju Oh ask “where have all the cyberfeminists gone?” Were I prompted for a marginally informed guess, I would say that they haven’t gone at all. In an environment where a comfortable online/offline dichotomy becomes increasingly difficult to maintain, feminisms are plenty and being a feminist online can take as many forms as offline. From this perspective, cyberfeminism has diversified beyond being traceable and cyberfeminists have gone everywhere and nowhere in particular. To further think about cyberfeminisms legacy, it might thus be useful to draw on attempts to break down this complexity, however fluid and permeable the resulting categories may be. In a seminal piece, Kira Hall had termed the transgressive, queer and utopian brand of cyberfeminism that I have briefly introduced “liberal cyberfeminism” and identified a second, opposing notion of “radical cyberfeminism”. The latter emerged as a reaction to the perceived reality of the Internet as a sexist and misogynist space dominated by boys with their toys and “resulted in the separatist development of numerous lists and bulletin board systems which self-identify as ‘women only’”. She saw these competing brands of cyberfeminism as incompatible and, in reference to Haraway’s “I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess” pessimistically concluded that

Gender may well be an unfortunate dichotomy, as postmodern virtual theorists argue, but cyberspace is generating goddesses and ogres, not cyborgs -Kira Hall, 1996

More recently, ‘online feminism’ has been defined as feminism that uses the Internet, and social media in particular, as its medium. Building on the legacy of radical cyberfeminism, considerably expanded by web 2.0 affordances and growth in numbers, current era online feminism engages with myriad issues as diverse as bringing more women and girls into tech fields, maintaining feminist blogs, wikis and other community spaces and tackle misogyny, sexism and heteronormativity in social media, game culture or society at large, to name but a few. Online feminism on the one hand engages with concerns directly related to the Internet, and on the other caters to a much wider range of interests that use the Internet as a platform for organising, communicating and raising funds and awareness.

An area that has (unfortunately) received much less feminist attention is Internet policy and governance, which has emerged as a somewhat distinct field in the nineties, in parallel with the development of the WWW to a mass scale. Internet policy can be defined as:


those laws and regulations that are either specific to Internet infrastructure and its uses (...) or apply to long-standing legal issues that have so qualitatively changed in nature in the digital environment that significant changes are required of the legal system -Braman 2011, 140

I use the term Internet policy in a broad sense, not limiting it to politics, policy and polity, but including all social struggles around questions of how the Internet should/should not be shaped, used and regulated in future (Ganz 2013, 7). Braman (2011, 156ff) has identified four thematic clusters the field deals with: Access to the Internet (the digital divide within as well as across societies), access to content (censorship, net neutrality), property rights (copyright, patents, intellectual property in digital culture) and privacy (data protection, anonymity). All of these clusters are highly contested terrain, yet to large extents define social relations on and with the Internet. The actors negotiating them include national governments as well as international organisations, the private sector, the tech community and civil society.

These clusters are all in one way or the other closely related to feminist thinking around power relations, inequalities, and intersectional critiques, yet feminist engagement has been rather minimal. The potential consequences of the negotiations and contestations around Internet policy and governance are by no means limited to some abstract notion of the “online world” (imagined as separate from a “the real world”), but have repercussions for the political, social and legal context we all live in, and social struggles take place in. A recent study (Ganz 2013, accessible [here](#) in German) has identified potential starting points for feminist intervention in each of the clusters outlined above. Out of the four, questions around access to the Internet in terms of the digital divide have probably so far received the greatest extent of feminist attention. Where complexities around access to content, property rights and privacy are concerned, however, there remains much potential to enter the conversations.

Take for example [net neutrality](#), the principle that all content on the Internet should be treated equally, not discriminating against particular users, platforms, and modes of access. Neither governments nor Internet Service Providers (ISPs) should, according to the principle of net neutrality, meddle with access to content based on either its ownership or its source. Yet, in a vast majority of countries, net neutrality is not currently a legal requirement (the few exceptions being Chile, the Netherlands, Slovenia, and [potentially soon France](#)). Conflicting interests, not only between governments and ISPs (think deep packet inspection, surveillance and state censorship), but also of corporate content providers lead to a precarious situation where ISPs essentially not only have the power, but the right (and sometimes even the legal obligation) to [censor](#) or [promote](#) content. Decisions on what content is considered appropriate or offensive are made by corporate entities and materialised in code, often to the detriment of feminist content, for example when [Google excludes bitch media](#) from its services, in Facebook’s rather troubled relationship to [breastfeeding mothers](#) or [feminist activism](#), or when Apple’s iTunes store [censors Vagina](#), incidentally the title of a Naomi Wolf book. Net neutrality not only needs to be a feminist issue to protect feminist content, but also to defend the Internet’s potential to promote social justice and democracy that feminism as well as other social movements rely on to facilitate debate and networked counter-publics (Ganz 2013, 11-12).

Feminist legal studies have shown how copyright laws and related processes are inherently gendered, as “they are written and enforced to help certain groups of people, largely male, assert and retain control over the resources generated by creative productivity” and play “a role in sustain[ing] the material and economic inequality between man and woman” (Bartow 2006, 551; Ganz 2013). The feminist contention that the personal is political and decades of feminist engagement with the public/private binary similarly suggests that feminist positions have a great deal to contribute to negotiating shifting boundaries, practices and politics of privacy as one of the big Internet policy issues. On the one hand, the defense and protection of privacy in a networked environment should *per se* be of feminist concern. On the other, complicating ongoing debates by drawing attention to power relations, privilege and exclusions inherent in an uncritical notion of privacy is essential (Ganz 2013, 19).

Much as the Internet is a rather different space now than it was 20 odd years ago, the ways in which feminists organise and interact online has taken myriad shapes since, and that is without doubt a good thing. In addition to using the Internet as a means to many ends, and to tackling sexism where it arises online, however, feminist thinking needs to engage with the [big issues](#) shaping the future of the Internet by playing a critical part in Internet policy and governance.  The

Internet creates new social spaces, shapes social relations and reconfigures the public/private and local/global divides, as well as institutions like the state, market and community. Internet policy and governance, of course, are not negotiated in a vacuum free from power relations, but are firmly embedded in existing legal, political and social structures, and re-shape them in turn (for better or worse). If the **“feminist revolution” is indeed to take place online**, feminists might do well to not stop at online feminism but to actively engage with the constitutive forces behind the Internet.

Utopian thinking in/of cyberspace is not merely far-fetched and illusory, but holds real feminist promise in its way of imagining things differently. Such imaginative power should not be underestimated. -Bromseth and Sundén

While liberal cyberfeminism as initially imagined may have lost most of its immediate appeal, after all it is clearer today than ever that the Internet is no disembodied gender, race or class free space and should not be romanticised as such, it is well worth retaining some of the cyberfeminist idealism. Geared towards Internet policy and governance, the transformative potential cyberfeminists saw in the WWW might contribute to creative and equitable solutions. Extending intersectional critiques of neoliberal hegemonies and the underlying gendered norms and binaries to the ways in which not only online feminists, but global society get to use the Internet in future, and how decisions made in the name of Internet policy and governance seep into daily life, may prove crucial.

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